

'Cattle Barons' Rebellion' Gives Colorful Version of History

LARAMIE — A reprint of a pamphlet written and published more than half a century ago has been uncovered in an unnamed location, but most likely it is a community in Wyoming.

The pamphlet is entitled "The Cattle Barons' Rebellion Against Law and Order" and is dedicated to "rustlers" of Johnson County, Wyo., and other communities where rustlers risked "their lives in defending their homes, their lives and their constitutional rights."

The article, which first appeared in the *Buffalo Bulletin*, a weekly newspaper still extant in one of Wyoming's northernmost communities, labels itself "true history of the Johnson County invasion by a motley gang of assassins" from the south (southern Wyoming, that is).

The so-called "Johnson County war" took place, of course, but not necessarily exactly as related in the pamphlet. As told by the official Wyoming Guide Book, trouble broke out between the so-called cattle barons (some of whom had come to the United States from England) on the Western ranges as soon as herds of longhorn steers had been driven to the high-country plains from Texas.

Cattle rustling was common and the term "rustler" was often applied to the small operators and home-steaders. Cattle stealing was difficult

to cope with because the offenders often acted at night and branded the critters before their true owners could find them and protect their property. Gradually bands of rustlers were organized and preyed on herds of the so-called "barons." Several killings occurred in that period.

Peace between the factions of cattlemen occurred when it was shown that their competitors for grass and water were the sheep growers. The cattlemen claimed, rightly or wrongly, that their animals refused to graze on land overrun and closely cropped by sheep. In the bitter controversies many lives were lost. This was dramatized when Tom Horn was hanged in Cheyenne in November 1903 as the murderer of Willie Nickell, which was undoubtedly the result of the cattlemen-sheepmen range feud.

While cattle operators held their own for a time, sheep interests eventually won a place and brought much wealth to the Intermountain West. An era of settlement began in the early 1880s and Wyoming's population increased 300 percent.

Following are selected excerpts from the pamphlet, authors unknown:

"The people of Johnson County, the 'bought' county of Wyoming, so christened by Judge Blair in his address to the grand jury in the spring

of 1889, were rudely awakened from their peaceful pursuit of their accustomed avocations by events occurring that week.

"On the night of April 6 there arrived near Casper, on the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad, a special train loaded with men, saddle horses, three wagons and teams, ammunition and camping outfits. Embarking took place before daylight and the party came in this direction. The teamsters were instructed to tell anyone who inquired about their destination that they were a surveying party bound for the Bald Mountain region.

"At the D.R. Tisdale & Company's ranch on South Powder River, Dr. Penrose of Philadelphia, Ed Towse, *Cheyenne Sun* reporter, and W.E. Davis of Johnson County remaining behind, the latter as one of the teamsters put it, because he was taken sick with the 'gunfire.'

"Before daylight on the morning of April 9 the party of cattle barons and their hired assassins arrived near Nolan's ranch on the Middle Fork of Powder River, commonly known as the KC Ranch, which ranch they surrounded. There were at the ranch four men: Nathan D. Champion, Nicholas Ray, Ben Johnson, a trapper, and another person whose name was not recorded.

"Shortly before daylight Johnson stepped out of the door and was captured immediately, one other man soon followed and he met the same fate. Nick Ray stepped into the doorway to see what had become of his companions and was shot through the head. He died later that morning. Nathan Champion then fought the crowd until nearly 4 o'clock that afternoon. About 3 p.m. O.R. Flagg, who was mounted, in company with his stepson, Alonzo Taylor, who was driving a light two-horse wagon, came down the road from his home on the way to the Powder River stage crossing, when Flagg had an appointment to join his colleagues in attending a Democratic state convention in Douglas, to which he had been elected a delegate.

"On approaching the KC Ranch he noticed armed men on either side of him but suspected no danger until his son was halted and shot at. Taylor did not obey the command to halt, but put his horses on the run to escape. Flagg who also was shot at by seven gunmen, two of whom he recognized as C.S. Ford and M. Shonry, hurried to the wagon, took his rifle and holding these seven men at bay with his empty rifle, gave Taylor time to cut loose one horse, mount and then both hurried away northward. They were followed a mile or more and constantly fired at, but escaped without injury. The cattle bar-

ons then killed Flagg's other horse, took the wagon, loaded it with pitch pine, set it afire and ran it against the house where Champion was defending his life.

"They succeeded in setting the building afire.

"Sheriff Angus returned to Buffalo Monday morning, bringing the report of the killing of Champion and Ray and the burning of the KC Ranch buildings. At the head of about 40 men the sheriff then proceeded in person to the TA Ranch and assumed command of the posse.

"Reinforcements from this and Sheridan County continued to come in hourly and proceeded to the scene of the difficulty. Two hundred and fifty men were assembled under the sheriff.

"Monday morning the posse captured three wagons belonging to the invaders. These wagons were loaded with forage provisions, bedding, personal effects, ammunition and two cases of dynamite; also some kerosene.

"The telegraph line, which had been put out of commission during the violence, was repaired Tuesday evening and the wires were soon hot with dispatches both directions.

"Maj. Martin of the National Guard received orders to assume command of Company C and was at

once met and put on duty in Buffalo; four commissioned officers and 23 enlisted men responded. The commandant at Fort McKinney, not far away, received orders Tuesday to assist civil authorities in making arrests, and Col. Van Horn at the head of three troops of cavalry rushed to the scene of the killings.

"The sheriff's posse soon dismantled the wagons and using two hind axles with the outer wheels constructed a movable breastwork, behind which these 40 men advanced on the fortifications and took them by storm.

"The troops quickly surrounded the buildings of the offending party taken by storm. Maj. Wolcott, commanding the cattle barons surrendered soon to Col. Van Horn."

The pamphlet lists 45 names of the "the murderers" and pinpoints the blame. Funerals and military rites were held later in Cheyenne and Laramie.

Thus peace came to the scene of the bloody Johnson County war. Made part of the official record was the diary of Nathan D. Champion. It was found in his blood-soaked clothing. In it he had jotted down the events as he encountered them. The last lines were as follows: "I think they will fire the house this time. It's not night yet. The house is now fired. Good bye boys, if I never see you again . . . Nathan D. Champion."